DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 801 CG 018 004

AUTHOR Kunutu, Placid J. M.
TITLE Assessing Cultural Influences on Members Experiences in Group Processes.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development (New York, NY, April 2-5, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; College Students; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Influences; *Foreign Students; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Interpersonal Communication

ABSTRACT

Group communication and processes may be affected by differing cultural and racial backgrounds of group members. To assess these influences and to evaluate course offerings in group dynamics, six foreign and non-white student participants in the Group Practicum at Columbia University were interviewed individually for 1 hour. To balance the findings, two American group facilitators and one Jewish female participant were also interviewed. The results indicated that the patterns of group silence, the meaning attached to group leaders', authority, and sharing of feelings were all influenced by participants' cultural background. The findings suggest that the group process can help to develop cultural sensitivity in interpersonal relationships. (BH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED253801

ASSESSING CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON MEMBERS EXPERIENCES IN GROUP PROCESSES

Placid J. M. Kunutu
Medical University of Southern Africa
South Africa

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P. J. M. Kunutu
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG018004

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development, New York, NY, April 2-5, 1985.

A reaction Paper on: ASSESSING CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON MEMBERS EXPERIENCES IN GROUP PROCESSES, outlining surveyed responses of international students who had done and participated in the Group Practicum and T-Group Training courses at Teachers College, Columbia University during the Spring of 1984.

Placid J.M. Kunutu
Medical University of Southern Africa
Republic of South Africa.

April, 1985

ASSESSING CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON MEMBERS EXPERIECES IN GROUP PROCESSES

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

The survey was intended to offer foreign and non-white students, including American blacks, the opportunity of giving feedback on how they felt impacted upon from a cultural perspective, by their participation in the courses cited for the survey. It was also viewed as an outreach effort on the part of the course instructor to help establish a sound basis for a critical evaluation of the course offerings in group dynamics, with a view to formulating approaches for adaptive designing of the courses in growth and development.

The survey took the form of individual interviews each lasting an hour, during which time the following sample group was sounded for their reaction.

SAMPLE GROUP COMPOSITION

a. Four foreign female students encompassing two (2) Japanese, one American black and a hispanic from Venezuela.

b. Two (2) black men, one from South Africa (surveyor) and one American black from California.

c. In order to balance findings from interviews with student participants, one white American male,

and one black female American, both of whom had served on the training staff of the Group Dynamics courses as facilitators, were approached for their observations and comments derived from training sessions.

d. A Jewish female student who had done the Group Dynamics courses was also probed for her reactions so that her perceptions could be checked against the self-perceptions and self-awareness of foreign students.

SAMPLE SIZE

The size of the sample group was subjected to constraints such as:

a. The availability of students for the survey, because most students either leave for home on completion of their courses or transfer to other institutions, factors which make tracing them not an easy endeavor.

b. The number of students on campus at Teachers College, at any given time, who have done the relevant courses to qualify for inclusion in the reaction survey.

c. The willingness and readiness of the students for the survey.

d. The time element which restricted the surveyor's efforts to fit in time for the interviews by being cautious not to trespass on valuable time that the subjects treasured so much.

SOURCE MATERIALS AND READINGS

The researched findings of the survey will be viewed, processed and appraised, where and as much as possible, within the contexts of hypotheses and theories advanced in readings from:

Group Processes: An introduction to Group Dynamics
Microcosm
Analysis of Groups.

In addition, as part of the evaluation process, recommendations and suggestions will be offered for possible integration into course revision and design. Whether superficial or in-depth, the findings will be regarded by the surveyor as preliminary to further probing and investigation as an on-going effort.

SILENCE: ITS PERCEIVED IMPLICATIONS FOR THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED

All the subjects of the study directly and explicitly mentioned two levels of silence during group processes. The first and obvious level is that which reigns over the group at the opening session where the group members seem to have nothing to say or do before the leader or facilitator initiates communication and interaction at ice-breaking level. My sense is that this type of silence is understandable and generic as it is experienced identically accross group members irrespective of cultural background. One might call it undifferentiated silence. It is the silence of anticipation and expectation.

The other level of silence is that which is characteristic of certain members within the group who identify with a specific cultural orientation: "Whilst it may be true that at the commencement of the group the members are least aware of their specific connections with and differences from other people, objects, and ideas in the situation, they are also least involved and have easiest access to cultural definitions of the situation which render it familiar and harmless" (Microcosm, p. 178).

The silence of foreign and non-white students evinced a pattern that goes beyond the parameters of the commencement session of the group. It is cultural in the sense that in non-white cultures listening takes precedence over verbal communication. However, this silence does not mean withdrawal, resistance or indifference. It represents thoughful reflection. A case in point is that in which the Japanese mentioned that they do not verbalise as much as westerners. This view was reflected by American black students.

The degree and quality of silence among students in a group setting differ from individual to individual according to their cultural backgrounds and unique personalities: "For on the one hand, as the group continues, involvement increases, and more layers of the personality are engaged in the group situation" (Microcosm, p. 178). In fact Kurt Lewin brings out this point by distinguishing between phenotype and genotype manifestations of behavior patterns. Phenotype refers to observable behavior related to that which is actually said or done. In case of culture-specific silence, that which is "said" is represented by body language, and that which is done

is silent behavior. Genotype refers to the underlying meaning of behavior, which in foreign students means more listening than verbalization of affect. Non-white languages are rich in the use of metaphor, and silence and passive behavior are the metaphors for expressing thought and feelings. The surveyor felt that this was a valid interpretation of the silence that is observable in group interactive situations.

FEAR, ANXIETY

Interviewees were unanimous in admitting that anxiety and fear seemed to grip group members during the early sessions. Like silence these are undifferentiated because they carry through in all areas of the group's membership.

But foreign students experienced anxiety from cultural perspectives as well as additional anxiety stemming from their uncertainty of establishing trust, mutuality, and understanding in a controlled laboratory group dynamics exercise. The worrying question was:

How do I interact with someone who is racially, ethnically and culturally different from me?

How much of my trust should I invest in such a relationship?

Culturally a group has a different meaning and connotation. A group in the specific context is the whole community with whom life and living are shared in the broader society: "From this point of view of the oft accusation that the training group situation is an artificial one is not only absurd but ironic, for in fact it is a rather precise analogue of life itself" (Microcosm p. 178).

The anxiety of the international student is therefore wholly cultural in conception: "In the absence of awareness there is little fear"..... customary cultural techniques of interpersonal asepsis fall away, and deeper feelings nudge consciousness, but at the same time self-awareness, awareness of group identity and intragroup differentiation are all increasing, so that at the point where the most primitive fears about the group might become most visible they are already in a state of decay" (Microcosm, p. 178).

The surveyor's contention is that these fears and anxieties from foreign students are valid and need to be dealt with within the group through the facilitation of the members and the leader. The student should be allowed the option to express his fears right at the opening group session as a 'warm up' exercise. These fears and anxieties could be exacerbated if not given outlet through self-disclosure as a risk-taking venture. The Zucchini Connection, which is a model of interpersonal perception illustrates how people misperceive themselves and others through distortion and illusion (Group processes, p. 22). The inherent anxiety of the foreign student places limitations on self-disclosure in a cultural context because non-white cultures reserve intimacy and self-revelation to the extended family set-up and not to strangers. And yet my feeling is that: "In its initial situation (of all groups) causes anxiety and a concomitant regression .....in its initial phase the small group takes on a paranoid cast" (Analysis of Groups, p. 171).

Harry Stack Sullivan, in his theory of <u>parataxic distortion</u> describes how individuals tend to react to the behavior of others not in response to the reality of the

particular behavior, but according to their own perceptions. This theory, to my mind does not hold as an explanation for the cultural anxiety of the foreign student. Non-whites have been known to perceive their anxieties and fears as causally extrapsychic i.e. they perceive the social environment as the major source and cause of their problems and concerns. This represents reality for them, so that when the foreign student perceives the group members as culturally different from him, he is perceiving a proven reality for which he has no trust, hence his anxiety.

The lack of structure and direction in the group process, is also perceived as culturally alien to the foreign student. Non-whites are culturally dependent on active guidance, direction and lead. Anxiety arises from this uncertainty because behavior norms in their respective cultures are guided through customs, legitimate practices and role-models: "..... boundary awareness: optimum adaptation to the outer situation at the cost of internal mal-integration ..... optimum internal adaptation/integration at the cost of maladaptation to the outer situation" (Analysis of Groups, p. 154).

I shared the culture-specific concern and anxiety of foreign students in dealing with strangers in a group setting because of the social differences that exist in the broader society where discrimination is rationalised on the basis of race and ethnicity, and distorts the self-perception of the minority student. He feels he should rather concern himself with this reality than any other. But I still believe that this anxiety cannot be eliminated, it can be moderated through interaction within the group.

SURVEYOR'S VIGNETTE

My fears and anxiety were somewhat allayed when the course instructor requested me to disclose myself to the group that was doing Group Practicum in the Spring of 1984. This gave me the opportunity of giving the group my cultural perspectives regarding the course, age, authority, power, race, ethnicity and religion. This exercise included:

a. Acceptance of my ethnicity and all that goes along with it.

b. The fact that gender has no issues with my cultural identity because according to my culture, as a male I have culturally specific authority and power in my family constellation and in society.

c. Acceptance of that authority which has been placed above me.

d. That the fact of my cultural awareness does not make me oblivious to change and adaptation, hence I developed an open disposition to a 'sense of occasion' in dealing with my group members and doing as the Romans do whilst in Rome.

This comprehensive self-disclosure helped me to relate to my young, Jewish and female co-trainer with rapport and understanding. I felt accepted by the group because I had given them untested trust, they knew who I was.

The purpose of this vignette is to indicate that cultural issues are not rigidly unadaptable. The foreign student can benefit from sharing his culture with others in order to promote interpersonal relating and understanding. It

is seen also as an exercise in risk-taking. My contention is that fear and anxiety can be dealt with effectively in the supportive setting of the group. Skills dealing with the management of anxiety become possible through sharing feelings with others.

POWER AND AUTHORITY ISSUES WITHIN THE GROUP

The group members were unequivocal in registering their deep consternation at the experience of witnessing the group leaders/facilitators being brought under fire, as though they were the victims of the group's anger and wrath. The course instructor and her assistant were equally immolated by the group. Who had power in the group? To me the overriding question was: Who is the authority? Like other foreign students, I was culturally polarised from the group situation because the power and authority of the instructors and trainers were to my perception inviolable. They were perceived as having all the answers, as well as knowing right from wrong.

What baffled us most was the fact that our American black group members seemed to be swept by the mainstream group members in forming an alliance against authority. My ambivalence grew as the power struggle and authority issues escalated. The group wanted guidance and direction from the leaders, and yet the group was contesting the power position of the facilitators. Theodore Mills identifies this process as 'Identification through Aggression'. The group seemed to resist the trainers overtly, but covertly they seemed to be dependent on them for guidance and leadership.

Whether I was a facilitator, observer or group leader, I could not stand to have my authority challenged by group members. I strongly identified with the instructor and her assistant. Other foreign students felt discussing power and authority issues was to them boring and uninviting because our position regarding these western luxury topics was that they were non-issues to us and therefore beyond words.

LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

It is ironic that, contrary to common belief, the survey group did not rate language mastery in the use of English as a second language, as a major communication hurdle during interaction within the group. What to them appeared to be an issue was the use of American English as a vehicle for conveying thoughts and feelings. Most international students come to Columbia equipped reasonably with some form of 'regional' English acquired from formal instruction in their homeland and are therefore familiar with English usage to enable them to undertake graduate studies. So their problem is not language per se, but language for expressing affect in a group setting.

The influence of mother-tongue interference in handling English for couching thoughts and feelings, is unavoidable because people tend to think, feel, speak and emotionalize in the idiom of their mother-tongue even if they have to do so by the erratic use of the second language. It came out from the group that an additional concern is for foreign students to be expected to express feelings more than thoughts. Non-white cultures

require that thoughts should be separate from feelings and that the latter should only be given outlet unobstructively and where possible no strong affect may be thrown out unnecessarily. Hence, strong affect should be managed through self-control. This cautious use of affective language recalls what was cited earlier on about silence. Silence is intrapsychic language. For instance in my home language, I would say: I hear pain, instead of: I feel pain. The word for feel holds good for hear, depending on context and specific usage.

COLLECTIVITY vs COMMUNALITY

The group perceived clear boundaries between themselves as foreign students, and other white members. They saw themselves as communally connected to one another as a group from abroad and had analogous cultural relationships, but nevertheless maintained group cohesiveness and solidarity with white members of the group in a collective sense. Phillip E. Slater says: "Boundaries are seen as the psychosocial basis of group structure..." ..... Members share a common assumption about the group" (Microcosm, p. 154). Slater goes on to cite the maxim: Group identity and separateness, and further says: ".... group development rests on the gradual substitution of 'conscious' for unconscious bonds ..... awareness of a group as a group" (Analysis of Groups, p. 158).

As mentioned earlier on, the perception of reality for the foreign student has to do with extra-psychic psychosocial factors, which goes to explain why the boundaries of the group were seen in dualistic terms of collectivity and communality. Collectivity is for the group experience, communality as a way of life.

PERCEPTION OF FACILITATORS

The surveyed students reported having taken exception to the observation that the composition of facilitators who were appointed to the Supervision and Teaching of Counseling by the course instructor, had invariably displayed bias against blacks and foreign students, and in favor of whites. The ratio of whites to non-whites had been something like 3:1. This imbalance was perceived as insensitivity to cross-cultural awareness. The few non-whites who served as facitators were mostly American blacks. What about international students?

My reaction is that one is never sure which international students qualify for selection to the training staff. How many of them will have done the course? Such selection will obviously depend on the course instructor's discretion, and the willingness and readiness of qualifying foreign students. I foresee this trend changing as foreign students invest in the course and show keen interest.

The advantage of balancing out the discrepancies that exist is that the presence of international students on the training staff might motivate potential trainers, and also neutralise the ever-present anxiety and fear of submergence under the white domination. A sense of being represented and understood within the group might help the foreign student open up more easily and interact in a permissive miliue with trust and confidence. The interventions of the culturally-relevant facilitators might have meaning and help than otherwise. My recommendation is that if the effort to increase facilitators is considered feasible, it should be fostered vigorously.

PERCEPTIONS BY FACILITATORS

Black Female American

This facilitator felt singled out by being the only black in a group of four facilitators. Her being black and female seemed to expose her minority status as a drop in the ocean. Her somewhat few intervention were frowned upon as though they were unlike those of other training staff members. She is aware that she displayed the same characteristics as those by culturally different group members from abroad and the black American community. This made her sound more as a group member than a leader.

My observation is that at the closing group session, all other facilitators received superlative compliments from group members, except herself. In fact one black American female member attacked her as being aloof, uncommunicative, overbearing and wanting in human relationships. It seems her presence on the training staff had aroused expectations of connectedness, solidarity and rapport. I sense she was torn between two forces i.e. her non-white group and her fellow-trainers, and yet I get the impression that she maintained her trainer position and did not succumb to the folly of being lured into membership solidarity. This confirms the need to engage more blacks on the training staff.

White American Male

He perceived marked cultural behaviors between foreign students and American blacks. According to him the silence of foreign students was perceived as culture-specific, and

that of American blacks as naked resistance against authorities in the group training. I regard this sweeping generalization as most unfortunate. But on the other hand I appreciate his observation as very significant for the cultural distinctions between local blacks and those from overseas. It is a proven fact that blacks from the Caribbean do not identify with American blacks. These inter-ethnic discrepancies add a dimension to cultural sensitiveness even amongst kindred groups.

Jewish Female

She declared herself as having had little exposure to foreign students and could only express her impressions in very moderate terms. The group courses she had attended did not include foreign students, but had a sprinkling of American blacks.

I found this information revealing in that it became clear that the enrollment of foreign students for the cited courses in any given semester, is highly unpredictable for unknown reasons. In other words there is a possibility that group members might go through the course without exposure to cross-cultural interactive relationships, so much so that they complete the course with an 'incomplete'. There is no way in which this discrepancy can be corrected because it is a no win or lose impasse.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The survey as outlined above with reported outcomes, indicates that much could be done with a larger sample group, and yet we have to start working with the resources

we have at hand. Nothing is a standard rule or a conclusive assertion regarding silence, anxiety, fear, authority, power issues, and language. The outstanding question remains: Does cultural behavior say or explain everything? My contention is that the development of cultural sensitivity in the conduct of interrelationships is a growth point for skilful living.

References

Thomas Mills. Group Processes : An Introduction to Group Dynamics.

Phillip E. Slater. Microcosm, Structural, Psychological and Religic Evolution in Groups.

Graham S. Gibbard, John J. Hartman, and Richard D. Mann, Editors. Analysis of Groups. Contributions to Theory, Research and Practice. The Jossey-Bass Behavioral Science Series.

Derald, W. Sue. Counseling the Culturally Different. Theory and Practice. With chapter contributions by Edwin H. Richardson, Rene A. Ruiz and Elsie J. Smith. Volume in the Wiley Series in Counseling and Human Development.

Anthony J. Marsella, Paul B. Pedersen (Editors) Cross-Cultural Counseling and Psychotherary. Pergamon General Psychology Series, 1983.

Leona E. Tyler. The Work of the Counselor. Century Psychology Series, 1969.